

## Want to do your heart a favor? Get some sleep!



If you eat a nutritious diet and get regular exercise, pat yourself on the back and keep it up. You're doing good things for your heart, brain, and overall health. But your body's most important muscle needs more than veggies, fish, and workouts. Sufficient sleep—both quantity and quality—is essential for cardiovascular disease prevention, confirms new research. Nearly 4,000 adults without known heart disease wore a device that tracked their movement and sleep for a week, and then underwent heart CT scans and ultrasounds. Researchers found that the participants who slept less than six hours were 27 percent more likely to have plaque buildup in the arteries (otherwise known as atherosclerosis) throughout their bodies than those who slept between seven and eight hours. And those who had poor-quality sleep were 34 percent more likely to have atherosclerosis compared with those who had high-quality sleep. Re-setting your sleep patterns requires committing to good sleep hygiene. Despite the name, sleep hygiene doesn't involve washing your sheets on a set schedule but, rather, being consistent with your bedtime and wake time, having a calming, electronics-free wind-down routine (no snuggling with your smartphone!), avoiding heavy meals close to bedtime, and being smart about alcohol and caffeine. Not surprisingly, in the study, caffeine and alcohol consumption were higher in those who slept less than six hours and those with poor-quality sleep. While drinking can make you feel relaxed, it can cause you to awaken in the middle of the night and interfere with sleep quality. If you drink, do so in moderation (up to one drink daily for women, two for men) and not close to bedtime. Keep your evenings free of coffee and tea or avoid them altogether if you're sensitive to caffeine. Talk to your doctor if you think you may have a sleep disorder such as sleep apnea, and above all keep in mind that sleep isn't an "extra" for good health—it's essential.

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